

Just before Veterans Day, I was afforded a unique opportunity to spend some time alongside our military personnel who are stationed on the frontlines in Afghanistan. With Thanksgiving approaching, the visit was both a chance to personally deliver a much-deserved "thank you" to our armed forces far from home, and a reminder of the dedication of our military who face many challenges each day in a very different environment than most of us will ever experience.

Traveling with a small congressional delegation, this was my third trip to Afghanistan to assess the progress of America's ongoing mission to stabilize that vast country which was once ruled by an outlaw regime aligned with al Qaeda. Having been to Afghanistan, both before and after President Obama's late 2009 troop surge, I was very interested in witnessing any signs of change.

Geographically, Afghanistan is a formidable place. It is the size of Texas with some of the most rugged and mountainous terrain and it is also one of the most undeveloped countries on the planet. Yet, despite its vastness and the slow pace of change, I was able to discern a different atmosphere than I witnessed on my previous journeys in 2009 and 2010.

During the trip, I traveled to the capital city of Kabul, visiting the U.S. Embassy to receive several briefings from U.S. civilian and military personnel, including American Ambassador Ryan Crocker. I also met separately with General John Allen, head of NATO military operations in country. Ambassador Crocker is a veteran State Department official with previous experience as America's top diplomat in Iraq and Pakistan. General Allen, who recently replaced General David Petraeus as head of the NATO-led operations, is an equally impressive leader.

Both officials agreed the efforts of America and our allies to rout the Taliban and bring stability to the country are bearing fruit. While the all-too-familiar news reports of attacks on American military personnel and Afghan civilians certainly illustrate that life in Afghanistan is far from secure, what you don't see on the evening news is the behind the scenes progress in the daily lives of ordinary Afghans: schools bustling with eager young students, many of whom are female (forbidden under Taliban rule), and even soccer fields in places where land mines once were planted.

To be sure, America cannot and should not remain in Afghanistan one day longer than is

necessary to stabilize the country so that it no longer poses a threat as a terrorist haven. But the consensus of Ambassador Crocker, General Allen and our military personnel in the field is that there is reason for cautious optimism. Short of a significant increase in terrorist activity from Afghanistan's neighbors, Afghan forces, supported by the coalition, can achieve irreversible gains and secure Afghanistan's key terrain by the end of 2014.

While in Afghanistan, I also traveled to Helmand Province, near the border with Pakistan, where I witnessed the progress made by our brave and determined Marine Corps. The Marines recently toppled the last enemy stronghold in Helmand and are now preparing for an upgrade in the region's infrastructure, which will include new roads and a dam for hydro-electric power. This was my third time to walk on the ground in Helmand Province, an area throughout the war known for its clashes with insurgent forces.

From Helmand, we flew by Osprey – the tilt-rotor Marine transport aircraft – to Kandahar Province. I was informed by our military commanders that local Afghan police and military officials are effectively taking on a greater role in protecting their country – a testament to the training provided by our soldiers and a vital requirement as U.S. forces look to hand over control in the future.

The highlight of our visit to Afghanistan was a reunion with men and women from the 1165th Military Police Company based in Fairhope, Alabama. I last saw many of them in January when I spoke at their departure ceremony at the Fairhope Civic Center. I must admit that the 1165th and I shared a similar meeting away from home in the early days after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In December 2003, I met members of the 1165th while visiting Baghdad. Members of the unit placed a Christmas tree in a place once used by Saddam's regime to torture his political opponents. Needless to say, it was a very moving experience.

It was an honor to have lunch with military personnel from Atmore, Spanish Fort, Mobile, Brewton, Satsuma and Demopolis. We can all be proud of their service as well as the service of all our military personnel from Alabama and elsewhere who are patrolling the frontlines and helping to secure the peace near and far this Thanksgiving.

If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

For release: November 21, 2011